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Work Less, Party More: A Review Essay about Collaborative Teacher Professional Learning

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Abstract

This article reviews the positive aspects of teacher collaboration. The author's latest research focuses specifically upon teacher professional learning and teacher efficacy; and, findings in this research suggest that, of all the reported opportunities for positive professional learning, the highest percentage of teachers note that collaboration with colleagues is the "best" professional learning. In addition, the author's previous research also had much to say about teacher collaboration. This article synthesizes this research and attempts to pull together foundational understandings that would help articulate "key attributes" of teacher collaboration.

Introduction

Professional development as a term and as a strategy has run its course. The future of improvement, indeed of the profession itself, depends on a radical shift in how we conceive learning and the conditions in which teachers and students work. Michael Fullan (2007, p.35).

My current research study is about teacher professional learning. I am interested in how teachers learn. Specifically, what can teachers tell us about their own best learning? We are only now in the midst of analyzing data; however, one finding sticks out. More than 80% of the teachers we interviewed and surveyed told us that collaboration with other teachers was the best professional learning they have ever experienced. If we generalize from the other things teachers say, that percentage would probably rise much higher. For example, some teachers told us they found conferences to be their best professional learning because they had a chance to “talk with colleagues about what they had heard.”

Teachers teaching other teachers – colleagues working together to better understand teaching and learning – is the core of collaborative teacher professional learning. Although the professional learning landscape differs today than even ten years ago, at its core, the PLC (Professional Learning Communities) movement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) was centered on teacher collaboration. When I advise teachers how they might best work to build collaborative professional learning, I tell them not try to build a professional learning community; instead, I tell them to commit themselves to two key educational goals: (1) Working Less and (2) Partying More.

Building Relationships

During my own research, teachers repeatedly reported that relationships were keys to teaching and learning success. For them, collaborative teacher professional learning meant building a community of teachers who enjoyed working and learning together. My teaching experience, supported by my research over the past 15 years, supports the efficacy of teaching and learning relationships – between students, between students and teachers, and between teachers. It seems that simple; and, sometimes I think we focus on word #1 (teacher) and word #2 (learning), but forget word #3 (community).

Furthermore, collaborative teacher professional learning research suggests that learning outcomes should be the primary criteria for assessing teaching and learning success. I am not alone in these findings. Martin Haberman (2004) saw that, if schools were to become learning communities, teachers had to “share a common vision that learning is the primary purpose for their association and the ultimate value to preserve in their workplace” (p. 52). Haberman also believed showing a love of learning was the best way to engage learner enthusiasm. He too believed teachers should “party more.”

My work suggests that collaborative professional learning focuses on four connected ideas: (1) teachers share with each other; (2) towards building a common vision; (3) with learning as the primary goal; and (4) constantly assess their success. Thus, professional learning is about improving learning and increasing teachers’ and students’ knowledge and power. My recent research (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) suggests that power is best shared; that success is best celebrated; and that dreams are the best goals. As Paulo Freire once noted, the purpose of literacy is to “diminish the distance between dreaming and doing.”

As I consider what I read, those who study professional learning agree on five keys: (1) leaders should support and share leadership; (2) teachers must believe in their collective power to create change; (3) visions and values should be shared; (4) communities must be built; and (5) teaching ideas should be shared. Let me discuss these five attributes briefly.

Key Attribute #1: Supportive and shared leadership

For supportive and shared leadership to emerge, principals must sanction and nurture the entire staff’s development. Principals must share authority, build capacity that helps others work, and participate without dominating. Principals must create an environment where teachers can learn.

Key Attribute #2: Collective Creativity

To build collective creativity, teachers should work together, actively sharing successes and ideas. Expansive patterns of thinking must be nurtured. Teachers must engage in considered and reflective conversation. Teacher research must become standard practice that informs decision-making.

Key Attribute #3: Shared Vision and Values

The goal for collaborative teacher professional learning should never waver from student learning. Teachers should talk together about what they believe should happen. They should converse critically – making the familiar “unfamiliar.” In other words, current practices and visions should be examined with the “common good” as the conversation focus.

Key Attribute #4: Supportive Communities

What are the natures of communities that promote teacher professional learning? Four areas stand out: (1) supportive physical conditions, (2) supportive skills and values, (3) supportive teacher characteristics, and (4) supportive student characteristics. The following physical conditions help support collaborative teacher professional learning. Teachers must have time to meet and talk and must have a space that promotes conversation.

The first value that helps teachers engage in collaborative professional learning is their belief that teaching is interdependent – that is, similar to other teachers’ work. From this belief emerges a willingness to give and accept feedback and the active respect and trust teachers must have for each other. Principals, my research has found, are keys to what happens in schools; and, as noted, principals must be supportive. A principal’s work includes building clear cultural norms that help develop a teaching and learning culture and finding time for collaborative teacher professional learning in the school’s schedule. Principals also support teacher professional learning by transparently working to create open communication. Simply said, teachers must have and know they have administrative support.

In my research experience, the following characteristics promote collaborative teacher professional learning. First, teachers must have strong communication structures. Although principals help create these structures, teachers must engage them. Second, teachers must feel empowered to act upon their beliefs. Teachers who hold positive attitudes toward school, students, and change engage in continuous collective inquiry and avoid cynicism. Teachers who focus on improvement as they work together share a sense of purpose. Such teachers engage in collegial relationships and share in school-based decision-making.

Finally, teachers and principals do not carry the burden for teacher professional learning alone. Students must actively embrace the community. Students must be engaged, which, my research suggests, is best done through “conversational pedagogies” – assessment for learning, problem-based pedagogy, etc. Finally, caring relationships between students, teachers, staff, and parents must be promoted.

Key Attribute #5: Shared Personal Practice

Finally, teachers must share their practices with each other. Teachers can share ideas about how they teach. Teachers can visit each other’s classrooms as peers helping peers. Teachers can share successes and failures and support those who need help, which, interestingly, is sometimes all of us.

What does collective professional learning look like?

A decade ago, Rick Dufour (2004) named three characteristics of PLC’s that have stood the test of time: (1) ensuring that students learn – his focus was not so much on teaching as on learning; (2) a culture of collaboration; and (3) a focus on results. Gone are the days when Dufour’s (2004) ideas set rules for building PLC’s or evaluating whether a PLC was *really* a PLC: although Dufour’s work was visionary, professional learning has moved past his lead. Today, teacher professional learning comes in many forms – teachers working groups whose goals center on curriculum building and assessing learning, peer coaching, and all forms of lead teacher models – including mentorship. Even school governance has become a shared practice of professional learning.

In addition to working as the Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) for fifteen years, I was for five years Director of Alternative Delivery Graduate Programs (the Masters of Educational Studies – MES) at the University of Alberta. In these jobs, I saw conversations help isolated teachers become part of a community of learning and children become part of that conversation. AISI, throughout almost fifteen years of existence, improved teachers’ morale, skills, and sense of professionalism as teachers worked in teams to build curriculum, develop assessment tools, share teaching strategies, and implement school improvement.

As AISI Director, virtually every project I reviewed noted the value of teachers learning, reflecting, and sharing resources and teaching ideas. As MES Director, I saw how powerful cohort graduate programs could be. Our completion rate for graduate students was over 98%, compared to an average under 50% for other graduate programs. I worked with teachers who increased their own professional learning by collaborating in action research and school improvement. I came to believe professional learning worked best when teachers (1) were collaborative, (2) focused on student learning; (3) sustained relationships; (4) decentralized and distributed leadership; and, (5) engaged in on-going inquiry and reflection (about curriculum, pedagogy, school climate, politics, community, etc.)

As I have considered collaborative teacher professional learning for the past two years, both through reading the literature and by engaging teachers in research data collection, I have come to the following insights.

First, collaborative professional learning should begin with teachers' self-identified needs. As teachers share their needs and formulate ideas with colleagues about how these needs might be addressed, they come to own their own teaching and learning. They begin to advance ideas about how to benefit their students and communities. As Jalongo (1991) long ago told us, they come to institute collaborative teacher professional learning by developing mutual trust and respect, engage ideas and values, assume responsibility for their own actions, freely explore alternatives, create and innovate; and learn by interacting with colleagues.

Collaborative professional learning is not complex in practice or philosophy. The most important element in improving teaching and learning is the commitment of teachers. Here, I agree with Dufour (2004, p. 11). Does collaborative teacher professional learning always work? No. And Fullan (2001) offers reasons why it won't – teacher and administration overload, teacher isolation, Group Think, narrow perceptions of teachers' roles, a lack of vision, and an understandably cynical history of failed or constantly morphing reforms. In some schools, cynicism reigns and a “culture of whining” absorbs teachers in “if-only” talk. Some teachers have lost a moral compass, and some lack a desire to empower their own learning.

As a result, barriers to collaborative teacher professional learning exist. These include both individual and school resistance to change; impatience that focuses on immediate results rather than engages process; top-down initiatives that undermine teacher ownership; and a lack of time and money. Obviously, errors are made. We often fail to understand school culture, impose change without building solid support, engage too much change too quickly, ignore adult learning principles, assume relationships build themselves, and fail to translate professional learning into professional practice.

What to do? I believe, to encourage collaborative teacher professional learning, schools should define school goals collectively to create shared vision. Teachers can collaborate and partner with communities and parents. Schools can merge collaborative teacher professional learning with professional development. Schools can define collaborative teacher professional learning broadly to include students. Finally, schools can create space where teachers converse openly about their work.

Teachers can collaborate toward goals: there are issues to study and problems to solve. And, there are parties to be had when goals are reached. In my experience, successful collaborative professional learning achieves two goals: it accomplishes the task at hand and it edifies a collaborative community committed both to action and relationships that are sustainable through adversity, dissent, and discouragement. The test of collaborative professional learning is not collegiality per se: it is how collaborative relationships advance student and teacher learning. Perhaps the biggest success of collaborative teacher professional learning is changed school cultures; and, the biggest cultural change is eradicating teacher isolation. Unless one is a first-order solipsist, one invites others to parties. Collaborative teacher professional learning means teachers are no longer lonely, but it also means teachers give up autonomy – a fear only relationships can overcome.

Collaborative teacher professional learning thrives on inquiry. We are moving as teachers towards the light of empowering action research. Most teachers' first language is the language of best practices – of what works. The things teachers naturally want to share are best practices, their successes (and, where they really trust, their failures and questions), and how they have reached their learning goals. It is almost passé to declare that teachers

already are researchers – inquiring naturally to complete the complex work of teaching. However, teachers are not trained to be meta-cognitive about this research. We seldom ask teachers to legitimate their inquiry, which collaborative teacher professional learning demands they do.

For teachers, collaborative professional learning is both easier and harder than it looks. It is easier because as soon as teachers commit, it works. It is harder because the hegemony of teaching isolation breeds cynicism easier than collaboration. Furthermore, without good models for engaging collaborative teacher professional learning, few recipes exist. Permutations exist within and across schools, districts, grade levels, and subject areas. Finally, it is easier to understand good relationships than successful student learning, which is a contested concept at best.

Collaborative teacher professional learning begins with conversations about learning needs, achieving goals, and appropriate assessment. Collaborative teacher professional learning includes teamwork built upon appreciating and learning from different teachers skills and experiences. Hence, each teacher who collaborates brings both individual and collaborative experiences and skills.

Finally

Collaborative teacher professional learning is an exercise in hope – hope that things can improve and that teachers can activate that improvement. As Sergiovanni (2004) notes, placing hope at the core of collaborative teacher professional learning provides encouragement, promotes clear thinking and informed action, and gives teachers insight to promote learning and solve educational problems. Merging collaborative teacher professional learning and professional development is a key.

Collaborative teacher professional learning must be ongoing and transparent. There is little novel about good collaborative teacher professional learning. It quietly works to professionalize teachers. The “sit-down, shut-up, write-notes” professional metaphor is alien to collaborative teacher professional learning. As one Alberta school division suggests, learning honors the past, creates a clear vision for the future, and pays attention to the

present. Conversation is the means by which to travel this journey (Rocky View School District No. 41).

By working with teachers in collaborative teacher professional learning, I have learned at least four important lessons. First, being forced from one's comfort zone can help. Standing pat makes change difficult. Second, teachers have different strengths. Realizing and utilizing these strengths is a key to productive change. Third, I have learned to celebrate – and not distrust – teacher diversity. Many of my best relationships emerged from partnering with opposite personalities and skills. Finally, I am reminded that we all respond to encouragement. Hence, I encourage us all to engage collaboratively as we promote change in teacher education.

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